

The Civilian Conservation Corps: One Man's Journey

By Ryan Forbess

The Great Depression began on October 29, 1929, but in Tennessee most people said they could not tell any difference, times had always been difficult.

Tennessee has always been a leader in agriculture. Tobacco, soybeans and cotton have been our top crops but by the mid-1930s much of the land had been farmed too hard for too long, eroding and depleting the soil. Crop yields had fallen along with farmer's incomes. The best timber had been cut off our landscapes. Morale was low, but Tennesseans had seen hard times before.



Clarksville's CCC Camp Montgomery #1474.
Courtesy of Hobart D. Parish

In response to the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt created many programs designed to put America back to work. The Civilian Conservation Corps was established in early 1933. The CCC mission was two-fold: to reduce unemployment, especially among young men; and to preserve the nation's precious natural resources.

Although the exact numbers vary, estimates of the young men who participated in the nine-year program reach 3 million. Enrollees performed a variety of conservation activities including reforestation, soil conservation, road construction, flood and fire control, and agricultural management. The CCC was instrumental in the development of a number of Tennessee State Parks and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Not only did the CCC provide food, clothing, and shelter for its enrollees, but it also offered them opportunities for education, vocational training, and health care.

Enrollment was offered to single men between the ages of 17 and 28. Enrollees signed up for a minimum of six months with the possibility of re-enlistment. Their motto was "We Can Take It!" because of the hard work they undertook and the tasks that lay before them. Initially, Tennessee's CCC boys earned \$30 per month, \$25 of which went to their families.

In the beginning, CCC camps were small tent villages, but as winter approached, permanent barracks replaced the tents. The structures offered no frills. A regular army officer or reserve officer commanded each camp.

"Our program is two-fold," President Roosevelt told the country. "Conservation of our natural resources and conservation of our human resources. Both are sound investments for the future..." President Roosevelt was right and what a legacy the CCC left in Tennessee. Today the numbers of surviving CCC members are dwindling, but most still try to meet in reunions throughout the state. CCC "boys" have an intense pride for the job that they did.

One such man is Hobart D. Parish, who was born in Carroll County in the community of Buena Vista. Like most people in rural West Tennessee, his family operated a small farm. Parish heard about the CCC, and like most young men wanted to join. At that time in West Tennessee most people made around 50 cents a week. The CCC was paying \$1 a day plus your food, and a decent place to sleep. This was motivation enough, and young men from every community hoped to enlist. In Carroll County the local magistrate or squire was the person tasked with selecting quality young men to join. The quota was nine at the time.

Parish and the magistrate's granddaughter had been playmates as children, so he knew the magistrate and was able to get a job riding with him to drop the CCC recruits off at Bethel College in McKenzie.

When they arrived at Bethel College that day the nine recruits were given a physical exam. One of the young men didn't pass his, and the magistrate wanted to make sure he filled the quota so he asked Parish if he still wanted to join the CCC. This is an opportunity that you didn't pass up, and Parish found himself at the day's end a CCC boy. His career in the CCC began on July 5, 1934, with a bit of luck and surprise.

After the exam they were loaded onto a train at the McKenzie Depot bound for Clarksville's CCC Camp Montgomery #1474. Many of the young men at that time had rarely ever left the county they lived in, so to them this journey was an eye-opening experience.

The next morning Parish awoke to the sound of a bugle and his work in the CCC began. He was selected to serve on the survey crew. He didn't have any previous surveying skills, and wasn't required to take any tests to be on the crew. All the training was on the job, and taught by an engineer.

The surveying crew was typically the first crew to arrive at a job site. The crew consisted most commonly of two to five CCC boys. They would map the farm or area that the other CCC crews would be working on in the future.

The crew engineer taught the survey crew the various methods of surveying. They were shown how to use a plane table; measure the land with chains; the use of triangulation methods to determine distance; and the use of a transit. They used an

alidade, a device to determine bearings, and a hand level in staking out small dams used to prevent and stop erosion. The survey crew staked these out and the work crews came in later to build them. They also surveyed areas where fire towers would be constructed. The survey crew worked on roads, telephone lines, terraces, and contour plots for farming.

Most CCC camps stopped work during the floods of 1937 to help with flood control and disaster relief. When the rains began in January the ground was already frozen so runoff into the rivers contributed greatly. Rain was reported 27 out of 31 days during January.

In Clarksville, the CCC camp assisted people in moving to higher ground if their home was expected to flood. The Clarksville CCC camp was sent to Hickman, Ky., along with another CCC camp from Pikeville. The two CCC camps worked together sandbagging along the riverbank. They slept on U.S. Army Corps of Engineers quarter boats in shifts. The area was under so much water many thought this must be what the ocean looks like. The flooding was so intense that large holes would open in the earth and water would begin flowing out. CCC crews would be forced to sandbag around these areas also to prevent them from flooding behind the levee.

“One of the saddest times during my CCC career is when we lost a boy to drowning in the Mississippi River,” says Parish. “He was walking across a plank between quarter boats and fell into the water and went underneath the boat.” The Coast Guard was able to retrieve his body from the water.

Parish remained in the CCC until he was discharged on June 5, 1939. He was quickly hired by the Nashville district of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as a rodman on a survey crew making \$1,260 a year. The skills he learned in the CCC as a surveyor served him well in the Corps of Engineers. His time in the Corps was spent working on surveys and placing navigational aids, buoys, and lights on the river channels of Tennessee. When the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began constructing dams in the Tennessee Valley, Parish surveyed those as well.

He worked with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers until he retired after 44 years of service. He held several positions in the Corps having worked in the field, in the District Office, in the South Atlantic Division Office, and in the Chief of Engineers Office in Washington, D.C.

No one felt more strongly about the work of the CCC than President Roosevelt. “This is going to be a busy and useful place in the years to come,” Roosevelt told the country as he visited the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. “Just as the work of these young men, will, I am very confident, lead them to busy and useful lives in the years to come.” These young men gained the skills and determination that aided them through their working lives from their days with the CCC. To many, their days in the CCC were the best part of their life. They gained a foundation on which to build a lifetime and in return we were given access to the wonderful places and things they created.

The next time you visit a state park or national park and walk along a trail or enjoy the detail of a stone walkway, remember those who worked to create these wonderful treasures. We can never forget the sacrifices that have been made to create these roads and structures. We need to do everything we can to protect and maintain this legacy for our children and future generations to enjoy.

Read more about the history of the Civilian Conservation Corps on the Web site www.cccalumni.org/history1.html.

Tennessee Youth Conservation Corps is New

The Tennessee Youth Conservation Corps was proposed by Governor Phil Bredesen and approved by the Tennessee General Assembly in 2006. This project is designed to echo the governor's vision of having a program that engages and equips young people with a hands-on conservation experience at Tennessee State Parks and Natural Areas.

The program promotes the principles of successful conservation by providing young people with a variety of natural resource management and restoration projects on state owned lands.

“The Tennessee Youth Conservation Corps will help train our next generation of environmental stewards and provide young people with on the job experience doing meaningful work in a variety of natural resource management and restoration projects on state owned lands,” said Governor Bredesen.

The program is open to any Tennessee resident that is currently age 16 to 24 and a high school or college student. Applicants should have reliable means of transportation, work well with others, function as part of a team, and be able to contribute in projects often conducted outdoors and may require considerable physical activity or manual labor.

Typical projects will include native plant restoration and invasive plant removal, trail construction and maintenance, restoring structures in historic areas, archaeological field work, collecting data to build a Geographic Information System, and participating in a statewide project to inventory the state's flora and fauna.

TYCC Project Sites for 2007 will include:

Bicentennial Capitol Mall State Park in Davidson County; Booker T. Washington State Park in Hamilton County; Cordell Hull Birthplace and Sgt. Alvin C. York State Historic Parks, located in close proximity to one another in Pickett and Fentress counties; and Burgess Falls State Natural Areas, located in Putnam and White counties.

Tennessee Youth Conservation Corps projects are also slated for the Cumberland Trail State Park, the state's only linear park, which will be 300 miles upon completion cutting through 11 Tennessee counties from Signal Point near Chattanooga to the Tennessee-Virginia-Kentucky border; Lawrence County's David Crockett State Park; Fort Loudoun State Historic Area in Monroe County; Natchez Trace State Park in Henderson County; and Pickett State Park in Fentress County.

Work by the TYCC is planned for Tims Ford State Park in Franklin County; and Shelby County's T.O. Fuller State Park.

Other TYCC projects and teams include: the Link Farm Archaeological Project; the All Taxa Biological Inventory/Exotic Plant Removal Team and the Middle Tennessee Natural Areas Team.

For more information on the Tennessee Youth Conservation Corps, visit the Web site www.tdec.net/tycc/ or contact TYCC Program Manager Mark Stanfill at 615-574-5176.

(Ryan Forbess works as the East Tennessee regional planner for Tennessee State Parks. He has worked as a park ranger at T.O. Fuller and Montgomery Bell State Parks.)